

Sowing the Seeds of Opportunity: Women in Agribusiness

On October 12, 1999, the United Nations recognized a benchmark event: The world population officially reached 6 billion. In spite of an adequate food supply, nearly one-sixth of the world's population is chronically malnourished. Furthermore, the Food and Agriculture Organization reports that global demand for food is expected to soar over the next 30 years as the world population increases by 2.1 billion people.

These facts and projections underscore the reality that agricultural production and distribution are more important than ever, now and in the future.

Agribusinesses are complex enterprises that integrate agricultural cultivation, value-added processing, packing, packaging, and delivery activities. The industry is dominated by transnational corporations. To function smoothly, agribusiness enterprises depend on a mix of technology, physical infrastructure, and labor. As global demand for agribusiness products increases, demand for these inputs will also increase—including demand for women's labor. To maximize future agribusiness productivity, producers now should examine current inefficiencies, including the differential treatment of women and men workers.

Why Women's Labor?

Work in agribusiness by women constitutes a significant proportion of their formal sector employment in developing countries. In Ecuador, for example, women represented over 40 percent of production labor and over 70 percent of processing labor in 1994. Similar patterns exist in Kenya, Côte d'Ivoire, Zimbabwe, Egypt, Guatemala, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and Russia. And the United Nations reports that as agribusiness expands in parts of Latin America, South Asia, and Africa, industrialized, export-oriented agriculture is drawing rural women into employment.

World leaders must examine the economic contributions of rural women if they have any hope of feeding their growing populations over the next 30 years.

—Jacques Diouf, Director-General of the
U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization,
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Women's employment in agribusiness is increasing in part because most rural women in developing countries already have experience working in agriculture. According to a 1999 U.N. report, women make the most significant contributions to rural economies around the world. They produce 50-90 percent of domestic food crops in Asia and 80-90 percent in many sub-Saharan African countries. They also bear most responsibility for household food needs. Simply put, women are an available labor source for work they already know and understand.

Agribusiness enterprises are attracted to developing countries and to women in particular because their labor costs are low. Women are frequently favored over men for tasks that require patience, dexterity, and attention to detail. Although the motivation behind these hiring decisions can be called into question, the underlying reality is that women's roles in agribusiness are expanding.

Importance of Agribusiness For Women

Over the past two decades, the average annual growth rate of agribusiness food production in developing countries has increased by one-third. This growth means more job opportunities in farming and in off-farm services that support agribusiness, such as processing, transportation, and marketing. Increased employment results in greater consumer demand for products and services, which in turn generates more employment, creating a virtuous cycle of economic growth. Furthermore, off-farm employment links rural areas to the urban formal sector and to international markets.

Paid employment for agribusiness work is a significant shift for women who have been doing similar unpaid work for the household. In addition to bringing direct financial benefits, being a wage-earner can also empower women in their personal relationships. For example, a 1993 study in Morocco showed that women employed in agribusiness not only controlled their own earnings, but

the status of “income-earner” also increased their role in household decision making. In Guatemala, women in a nontraditional agricultural export program reported that employment in a processing plant raised their self-esteem and increased their household influence. They also valued benefits such as guaranteed minimum wage, health care for families, and childcare.

Many agribusiness activities can be based in the home, with work contracted through households. This is particularly important for women who must balance household obligations and financial needs.

Barriers to Women's Work in Agribusiness

The combination of increasing global food demand and the largely untapped resource of women's labor in agribusiness suggests that the presence of women in the industry will continue to grow. Consequently, it is important to examine some obstacles that limit women's opportunities because, in the long run, these will constrain agricul-

tural productivity. Among these obstacles are employment-based restrictions, such as limited job advancement opportunities and low job security. Women also must contend with health and safety issues such as working with dangerous equipment and pesticides, and traveling alone to get to work. Socially defined gender roles can diminish the impact of employment for women. Protective legislation designed to help women sometimes has the opposite effect: employers may hire men rather than concede to women-friendly policies.

Limited Job Advancement Opportunities and Security. In agribusiness, women predominate in low-skilled jobs that typically are part-time or seasonal. This is partly because women are less educated than men in parts of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Limited formal education eliminates the opportunity for many of the jobs that typically require a secondary-level education, such as management and accounting positions and technical jobs using machinery. Training can be provided for many tasks, however, enabling women to move into skilled labor positions.

Women are also constrained by perceptions that emerge out of gender-role stereotyping. A study in the Dominican Republic, for example, revealed that supervisory and professional jobs are reserved almost exclusively for men. In Morocco, women generally work as unskilled laborers and men predominate in staff positions. Agribusiness employers there commented that women should not supervise personnel because women are not seen by others as authoritarian enough.

Another stereotype that limits the job mobility of women is a commonly held assumption that they have an “innate” ability to manage tasks—such as sorting,

Green Beans for Sale

In the remote hills of Kenya, on meager land holdings of an acre or two, thousands of once-poor farmers are participating in an export explosion. In fact, most of what they produce ends up on dining tables in Europe. The introduction of green beans in the mid-1980s was the first real success in government and donor efforts to make a difference in the lives of small-scale farmers, most of whom are women. Although some large farms produce this crop, contracts going to small farmers may account for 70 percent of the total employment.

The Kenyan green bean is thriving, where other cash crops have failed, because of its higher profit margins and greater versatility. And it is Kenyan women who led the wave of small farmers into this commercial export industry, working as farmers, plant workers, supervisors, and exporters. There are two reasons for this. First, the green bean can be grown on individual farms, allowing for the flexibility that many women need both to earn income and manage the household. Second, the green bean requires specialized skills for cultivation and harvesting that women have already mastered in other cash crops. Furthermore, it can be harvested and sold throughout the year.

As consumer incomes continue to rise in industrialized countries, demand for canned food is being replaced by new demands for specialty high-value-added products. Green-bean growers have cornered a niche market because this green bean is the sort of gourmet product consumers now demand: It is high quality and couldn't be fresher—from plot to plate within 30 hours.

grading, and packing—requiring manual dexterity and patience. Not only are these tasks tedious, with little room for advancement, but they also are undervalued because the skills used are perceived as being intrinsically “feminine.” In a tomato processing plant in the Dominican Republic, women predominate in assembly line operations requiring both dexterity and speed. Managers say that women are given such jobs because they are more careful and conscientious and better able to coordinate rapid eye/hand movements. Similarly, in Morocco, women are valued for dexterity and patience, whereas men generally are selected for training that gives them skills that are recognized with increased wages.

The low-skilled jobs in which women predominate, in addition to being the lowest paid and most laborious, also offer the least job security. These workers are easily replaced, and many of these jobs are seasonal, lacking the stability of consistent part-time or full-time employment.

To overcome socialized expectations that pigeonhole women into certain tasks, employers need to develop objective and open standards for judging employee performance and rewarding employees who perform well.

Health and Safety Concerns. Many tasks involve physical risk. Some activities use heavy or sharp equipment; plant floors may be slippery; electrical equipment may not be properly insulated. Health risks are common among workers who handle fertilizer and pesticides without protection. Women can be exposed to hazardous materials by washing clothes or touching plants with residual chemicals. Because this exposure is gradual and indirect, diagnosing subsequent health disorders and tracing them to their source are difficult.

Personal safety hazards of commuting sometimes limit women’s choice of employment. Some countries, such as Egypt and Bolivia, have attempted to legislate women’s safety by prohibiting them from working after sundown. However, this regulation eliminates women from most manufacturing jobs that operate two to three shifts a day.

Where such laws are not in place, employers can mitigate this danger by providing free transportation to central locations. In Guatemala, a producer of non-traditional agricultural products addressed the issues of commuting and irregular work shifts by hiring two teams of women who rotated work in two-week cycles. While working, women lived in company-provided lodging close to the packing facility.

Gender Roles. Gender roles are culturally defined. Women are generally expected to care for the household, imposing demands on their time that may be difficult to reconcile with the demands of paid employment. In some countries, women face work-related restrictions that stem out of culture or religion. For example, in traditional societies, men often control the cash resources available to



Photo by Wipul Sandanayake

Women pack cinnamon while the proprietor of Janapriya Spices (right, background) talks with AgEnt's WID unit advisor.

Cultivating Women Entrepreneurs

The Agro-Enterprise Project (AgEnt) is a USAID-funded initiative, begun in 1993, to assist the Sri Lankan private sector in developing sustainable agro-enterprises. Essential to the project is an advisory assistance unit to help Sri Lankan entrepreneurs develop the necessary skills to compete in global markets.

One year into the project, men made up the majority of people taking advantage of AgEnt’s technical and financial services: Of 131 grants, only 9 went to 3 women entrepreneurs.

To encourage greater involvement of women, AgEnt formed a Women in Development unit. A Sri Lankan woman with strong business development skills was selected to oversee a business development support center for women agro-entrepreneurs. This resulted in a tremendous increase of women grant recipients—to 26 since the WID unit was established. Two women assisted by AgEnt are profiled below.

Delishiya Gankanda had security in her government job. Yet she was looking for something better. Well aware of the risk she would be taking, she resigned and, armed with a diploma in agriculture, started her own yogurt-making business in 1986. AgEnt assisted her in buying new equipment for her venture, allowing her to grow her enterprise. Furthermore, she says, “From the equipment I bought with AgEnt assistance, I could ensure quality standards and food hygiene.” After 11 years, she received additional support from AgEnt as well as the United Nations Development Fund to diversify into greenhouse cultivation. *Delishiya* hired a woman graduate who helps her cultivate cucumbers, bell peppers, and tomatoes. She also has undertaken research activities on tissue culture of exotic plants. But *Delishiya* does not believe success should be exclusive: In hope of cultivating other entrepreneurs, she has awarded six scholarships to children of low-income families.

Jennifer Ingleton is the sole proprietor of Daffy’s Food Products, which produces fruit and vegetable delicacies for local and international markets. Since receiving assistance from AgEnt in 1993, she has led the company’s expansion into Australia, Maldives, Germany, Dubai, and Japan, generating revenues in 1998 of \$65,000. AgEnt support has been fundamental to her successes in international trade shows, where she has exhibited and sold her company’s products. This success has not gone unnoticed. In 1997, she won an award for her work from the National Chamber of Exporters; in 1998, she won the prestigious Pridyadharshini Award for “most outstanding lady entrepreneur in the South Asian region.” “Had it not been for AgEnt,” Jennifer says, “I would have never achieved what I have.”



the household. An employer can help ensure that wages stay in the woman employee's control by establishing a credit union or savings club at the place of employment.

In some cultures, women's mobility may be limited to prevent interaction with non-family men. However, this does not mean these women cannot work. In India, an organization was established to circumvent this restriction by establishing a secure work site for women. The assurance of no male presence allowed them to protect their own and family's honor while earning an income.

Selective Legislation and the Backlash Effect. Mandatory benefits packages may help offset the conflicting demands of women's household and formal

sector work. In Egypt, for example, employers must provide three months maternity leave and provisions for child-care facilities under some circumstances. However, legislation offering one group exclusive benefits can backfire. Employers, rather than abide by these requirements, may find it simpler and less costly to hire men. In contrast, legislation that benefits all workers benefits women as well—in Costa Rica, the employer must contribute toward government-sponsored social services that extend to all workers, thus eliminating the incentive for preferential hiring.

Harvest the Opportunity

As agribusiness becomes more integrated into the global economy, industry employers will seek innovative ways to expand and increase efficiency and their reach

will extend to a greater number of potential employees. The number of women employed and the responsibilities they assume are bound to increase. As the industry grows, it will become increasingly important to counter the barriers that women face—not just to increase their opportunities but also to improve productivity of agribusiness itself.

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